

## Resources

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*From Photons to Electrons: The Film Guide* Moving Images of the  
Pacific Islands

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## *From Photons to Electrons: The Film Guide* Moving Images of the Pacific Islands

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Some have called this the century of the moving image. While it is difficult to say whether such a claim is as true in the Pacific and for Pacific peoples as elsewhere, the Pacific Islands have become prominent in the global circulation of image and fantasy. The recent expansion of the film guide, *Moving Images of the Pacific Islands*, at the Center for Pacific Islands Studies involved more than merely enlarging the index, because the recovery of information about any film had the potential to completely alter the understanding of this history, largely because of the relative dearth of published information on the subject of islands film. Even a brief glimpse into the complexities of the history of Pacific filmmaking will suggest how poorly understood the Pacific is on film, and how much research remains to be done. A variety of materials are available for such research, including the most recent edition of the guide, published in both digital and analog formats in 1998 by the Center for Pacific Islands Studies.

Film was introduced into the Pacific Islands shortly after its invention. In 1898, Thomas Edison's company produced the first documented film in the region on the shores of Waikiki. Later in the same year, two itinerant European showmen, "Professors Gossman and Hou," introduced New Zealand to film at the Auckland Opera House. Within a decade, films had been produced across the Pacific—for

instance, by Australians in the Torres Strait and by the German Südsee expedition *Völkerkundliche Filmdokumente Aus Der Südsee* (1908–1910) in the Western Carolines and the Bismarck Archipelago. Some footage by apparently unaffiliated individuals also survived to be catalogued from this period, such as *Aus dem Leben der Kate auf Deutsch Neuguinea: Aufnahmen aus der Jahre* (1909). Over the next decade, this documentary trend continued, as in James McDonald's extensive and intermittent film project, which recorded many aspects of everyday Māori life.

This early system of representation was not limited to purely ethnological works. Filmmakers in Australia, the United States, and New Zealand also sought to incorporate Pacific Island motifs and plots into their feature presentations. Between 1898 and mid-1900, the peripatetic showman A H Whitehouse produced in New Zealand ten short topical films, which he screened at the Paris Exhibition. Gaston Méliès' company produced three films in New Zealand in 1912—*Hinemoa*, *How Chief Te Ponga Won His Bride*, and *Loved by a Maori Chieftess*. Australian Raymond Longford shot a version of *The Mutiny of the Bounty* (1916)—of which only stills now exist. One imagines it was well received, considering the stature of that director "down under." In the United States, the first Pacific features arose with Hollywood. *The Shark God*

(1913), produced by the World's Fair Company, may possibly have been the first. The most eminent American director of his age, D W Griffith, produced two works set in the South Seas, *The Idol Dancer* (1919) and *Love Flower* (1920), in which might be seen the narrative seeds of the better-known films of a later period. *The Idol Dancer* is the story of a drunken beachcomber who falls for the affections of the "half-caste daughter of the resident trader . . . White Almond Flower, in whom mingles the blood of vivacious France, inscrutable Java and languorous Samoa" (Schickel 422). In *Love Flower*, characters unjustly pursued by the law escape to "a romance island" in the deep Pacific. A handful of Crusoe films such as *Little Robinson Crusoe* (1924) all played on Stevensonian literary tropes of the European castaway or beachcomber struggling to understand and coexist with Islander tribalism and blood-dark spirituality. In New Zealand, Hayward Pictures filmed a Māori legend, *Hinemoa* (1924), and a work of historical fiction, *Rewi's Last Stand* (1925), featuring all-Māori casts.

In this early period of filmmaking in the Pacific (1898–1926), the penetration of film into the islands was not limited to a particular region. Rather, the media dispersed rapidly, closely following on the coattails of photography and stereoscopy. Though clearly dependent on lines of transportation from metropolitan locales where access to film equipment was possible, this rapid dissemination of film crews across the region in the era prior to transpacific aviation, despite the distances involved, indicates a strong

colonial interest in circulating and perhaps controlling representations of Islanders by the most technologically sophisticated means available. The substantial focus of the camera's gaze on aspects of documentation—recording the conditions and circumstances of daily life in Pacific places and by Pacific peoples—is also noteworthy. One might even suggest that such "documentary" and feature works were an established practice well before Robert Flaherty set foot in the region, even though he is the director who is typically invoked as the first light for (ethnographic) film in the Pacific. The conventional wisdom of most writing on Pacific film suggests that name-brand directors like Flaherty invented the Pacific on film in the mid-twenties. This perspective, commonly repeated in the few published works on the topic, denies Pacific film the possibility of any true historiography. In fact, by the 1920s, Pacific filmmakers were already deeply embedded in complex conventions of narration and representation—well demonstrated by the earlier period of film production in the region—that deserve analysis with the same tool kit contemporary researchers use to grapple with other media of the colonial era. In a *reel* sense, Flaherty was already refiltering the region through the lens of his age and its social and distinctive post–World War I political trends. His work contributed to previous and already widely circulated representations of Pacific islands and associated expressions of systematic (inter)cultural practice resulting in tropes of islandness.

Perhaps the most intriguing theme

to emerge from the froth of early Pacific films—the distinguishing theme of the period from 1926 to World War II in Pacific film—is the sinister conflation of ethnography and fiction into singularly complex works that allege “realism” in the context of overt romanticization. This is precisely what sets off Flaherty’s Samoan tale *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* (1926) and the Australian “Captain Hurley’s” *Jungle Woman* (1926) and *Pearl of the South Seas* (1926), set in the Torres Strait and Papua. These films explicitly claimed to document aspects of daily life in Pacific locales while titillating Australian and American theatergoers’ sexual and escapist fantasies. This trend parallels literary and ethnographic movements after the First World War. Films such as *White Shadows of the South Seas* (Flaherty and Van Dyke 1927), *Sadie Thompson* (Walsh 1928), *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (Flaherty and Murnau 1931), and *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Lloyd 1935) all draw on literary and travel writing clearly caught up in the colonial enterprise.

#### MOVING IMAGES OF THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

The Center for Pacific Islands Studies began compiling an index of Pacific films in the early 1980s. All along, the goal of the work has been to retrieve as much information as possible, even if only fragmentary, about films made in and about the Pacific Islands. The current edition of the guide is the fourth incarnation of this project. The first edition was the *Guide to Films about*

*the Pacific Islands*, edited by Judith Hamnett in 1986. Melissa Miller updated that guide for the conference Moving Images of the Pacific Islands held in 1989, from which her guide took its name: *Moving Images of the Pacific Islands: A Catalogue of Films and Videos*. Diane Aoki and Norman Douglas compiled over 1,100 entries and numerous subjects for the third edition of the guide, *Moving Images of the Pacific Islands: A Guide to Films and Videos* (1994). The current guide is the most inclusive of all these works. With over 2,300 entries, this edition focuses on entirely new directions for the project, especially feature films, travel and tourism videos, World War II films now available on video, and geographic films, as well as recently released ethnographic and documentary films. However, the work of the guide is by no means complete. Since the cutoff point for the current compilation, new information about numerous films has appeared. In addition, the guide still reflects a bias toward English-language films, especially those produced in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, although this edition includes information on a substantial number of German films. Compilers of future editions of the guide will need to closely examine British, Chinese, French, Indian, Italian, and Japanese cinemas for relevant works. Identifying and accessing such bodies of work will be a lengthy and complex task.

### SURVEYING FILM

There are very few relatively comprehensive guides to films about the Pacific Islands. Luis Reyes' recently released *Made in Paradise* (1995) stands out as the most visual and systematic. However, this work is neither complete nor terribly accurate when it comes to interpreting the significance of these films individually or placing them in their regional context. Jim Mellon's essay "Images of Micronesia on Film and Video" (1992) is exciting for its attention to critical issues and offers a detailed perspective on a subset of Pacific films. Douglas's two essays in the third edition of *Moving Images of the Pacific Islands* (1994) are detailed, and may be especially useful for teachers looking for classroom materials. Martin Blythe's work on Māori images in New Zealand film and television (1994) is a wonderful introduction to the issues of representation there. An examination of the major film encyclopedias turns up some material on a few Pacific films by the best-known directors. However, not one world film guide even categorizes Pacific film as such. Future work in the academic community may correct such oversight, and several students have recently completed or are in the process of completing theses and dissertations on various topics in Pacific filmmaking. For instance, Reshela DuPuis (1997) closely examined the history of community videography in Hawai'i and detailed some trends and experiences in that community that may crosscut cultural and political boundaries in the region. My own recently completed thesis (1997)

investigated the historiography of film in the region and sought to analyze the secondary and tertiary flow of narrative themes and historical trends outside the canon of often-cited films. Other graduate students in New Zealand and elsewhere are also working on film issues in their locales.

### VIDEO GUIDES

Sometimes the most fertile information turns up under the least expected cover. For information about a wide variety of feature films that bear on Pacific issues, the mass-distributed Blockbuster-accessible film guides are among the best sources. These guides tend to run to about seventeen thousand entries, of which three-to-four-hundred may, in some way, relate to the Pacific. Unfortunately, they tend to have no subject or geographical index, and it is up to the reader to browse through thousands of film titles in search of the occasional golden nugget. Readers with access to an audiovisual center might inquire whether a copy of the *Video Sourcebook* is available. This catalogue is meant to be used by librarians in their acquisition cycles, but does index films under such subject headings as "Pacific Islands" and "South Seas."

### ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

Quite a few large archives of Pacific films are located throughout the world. The Wong Audiovisual Center at the University of Hawai'i and the collections at the University of Sydney and the Australian National University

in Canberra are undoubtedly the most complete and comprehensive. The University of California Media Extension Center, the New Zealand Film Archive, the Australian National Film Library, the National Film and Sound Archive in Australia, and the Human Studies Film Archives at the Smithsonian Institution all house substantial collections, usually centered around a particular area or theme. Other large film archives, especially of ethnographic film, are located in Europe. For instance, the Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film Gottingen has a wonderful collection of documentary footage from Papua and New Guinea throughout the century.

#### REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Since the advent of the video age, commercial and political institutions have begun to create and distribute many new titles each year. The University of Papua New Guinea Press, the University of the South Pacific Media Centre, the South Pacific Commission, Pacific Islanders in Communication in Hawai'i, and the Micronesian Seminar in Pohnpei all actively support film and video projects and act as their own distributors.

#### PRODUCERS AND DISTRIBUTORS

The production and distribution of most Pacific films and videos operates quite differently from the norm. Even some of the most exciting titles may simply not be available through the large international distributors and may require contact with the producer

of the work in order to procure a copy. Various regional and international television stations and corporations, such as Television New Zealand, the American Public Broadcasting System, and the British Broadcasting Corporation, are an unexpected resource and often have distribution rights for works they have broadcast. The Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and L'Institut de la Communication Audiovisuelle de Polynésie Française are primary sources for information about current and historical French-language films of the Pacific and act as distributors for all of their own titles. *Moving Images* lists as many producers and distributors for Pacific films as could be found, including the most recent contact information where known. Contact information for producers and distributors is available online and in the published guide.

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

Discussion on the listserve of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania frequently includes exchanges dedicated to understanding and teaching Pacific films. Perhaps the finest pedagogical material pertaining specifically to Pacific film is generated there. The Moving Images of the Pacific Islands Database is a digital and searchable version of the film guide, with over 2,300 records. One of the missions of the online site is to act as a center for information pertaining to films. The site is currently set up with an electronic bulletin board that filmmakers and reviewers may use to circulate information about their film

interests. There are also a few websites pertaining to Pacific film. For example, search engines such as Yahoo and Lycos reveal a number of sites dedicated to the Māori director Lee Tamahori's *Once Were Warriors* (1994), and other New Zealand films that may prove useful to researchers. Finally, the large Hollywood and World Film indexes are also moving online and are available for access, usually for a usage-based fee. While these sites may not contain information on many Pacific films—they are especially lacking in information on ethnographic works—the information they do make available tends to be highly detailed.

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